

# family matters

warding off potential wedding day disasters

BY DAYNA DUNTEMAN

You've heard of bridezilla, but what if your wedding has a famzilla—or two or three? You know the type: he or she is related to you, hence the name. Famzilla could be anybody; your divorced parents who can't stop the mudslinging; your mother, who has commandeered the guest list and left your future in-laws fuming; your grandmother, who refuses to attend the wedding if your stepfather is invited; drunk Uncle Charlie.

It's enough to make you want to elope.

Before you and your honey sneak off to Vegas, consider this: While family conflict is never pleasant, handled correctly, it can lead to improved relationships long after the honeymoon is over. The key is to anticipate and prepare.

"Just as the rehearsal dinner is a prelude to the wedding day, the way a couple manages—or fails to manage—conflict before and during the wedding can be a precursor to the way they manage the inevitable future conflict within the marriage and family," says Andrea Orr, a licensed marriage and family therapist with offices in Roseville and Sacramento.

There are several reasons weddings often seem to channel the Hatfields and the McCoys.



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## POTENTIAL PITFALLS

First, "There are a lot of people involved, many with strong views about what should or shouldn't happen," says Roseville-based marriage and family therapist Steve McCready. "And people are often less worried about appearances when interacting with their families. They tend to let it all hang out."

"Secondly, a wedding is, ideally anyway, a one-time event. It's not like a vacation where you can always figure on making the next one better. As a result, people have high, often unrealistic expectations."

Add to that the high divorce rate and the fact that people are waiting longer to get married, resulting in split, blended and other family circumstances that may harbor unresolved conflict. Mix in alcohol and you've got instant fireworks.

In many families, the feuding starts as soon as the engagement ring is slipped on. Control over the wedding plans—especially if the bride's or groom's parents are picking up all or part of the tab—is a common bone of contention.

Lora Ward, owner of A Day to Remember Bridal Consulting and Wedding Coordination, says, "Weddings cost an awful lot these days. [The weddings I plan] with 150 guests and all the usual bells and whistles cost around \$35,000. So money is a huge breeding ground for problems."

## EXPERT ADVICE

Ward says, "As a consultant, I have to find out what my clients' priorities are. In the extreme case of a mother trying to design her daughter's wedding, I try to get a balance of the two. I urge brides to think about their battles. Don't look back on a decision that was made; once it's done, it's done. You've got to concentrate on what the [wedding] day is about. You can't keep worrying that your mom wanted ecru paper for the invitations and you wanted white."

Above all, experts advise, be straightforward in communication and be willing to compromise.

Says McCready, "Unwritten contracts often exist around the issue of payment for

the wedding, which can lead to significant conflict, especially in families that have poor or indirect communication. One of the most important things a couple can do when planning their wedding is to discuss the issue and make it very explicit. It's important that everyone involved understands and agrees to the 'deal,' whatever it is."

Couples battling their parents over plans might find that neutralizing language goes a long way toward smoothing ruffled feathers.

"A really valuable and not-enough-used word is 'different,'" says midtown licensed marriage and family therapist Victoria Seeley. "There's a qualitative difference between hearing, 'I'm going to do it my way' and 'I have a different idea.' The first is adversarial—you versus me. 'Different' is not adversarial."

Couples also should strive to think beyond either/or, Seeley adds, relating a story about a bride she knew whose parents wanted her to get married in a church—but her fiancé was divorced and

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*“What if a relative wants to attend the wedding, but you’d rather exclude him or her?”*

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impulsive decision. It was a very thoughtful decision, and very painful for her. I don't know if anybody can say that what they decided was absolutely right, but what you can say is that it was the decision you needed to make at the time."

Rather than risk alienating a problem relative, you may decide to grit your teeth and invite that person anyway, hoping they'll be on their best behavior. But what if they end up making a scene? Is there anything you can do to prevent that? Most definitely.

"If you're already dreading it, you're anticipating it. And if you can anticipate it, you can set up some parameters," Seeley says.

For relatives who don't get along, a carefully planned seating arrangement can save the day. In the case of divorced parents who can't hold their tongues, Ward suggests using a grandparent or other "neutral" relative as a buffer between the two in the same row at the ceremony.

The same care should be taken at the reception.

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"For reception seating, divorced parents don't have to sit at the same table of eight or 10," Ward says. "If they're friendly, certainly they can, but there are enough other relatives and friends to make up other groupings."

As for drunk Uncle Charlie—or any other relative prone to becoming obnoxious—enlist the help of a trusted friend or relative. The designated person can stay close and keep an eye out for trouble, then escort the offending party out the door if necessary.

While no one considers these sorts of scenarios part of a dream wedding, it can be beneficial to look for opportunities amid the conflict. Who knows, famzilla might start looking more like a pussycat.

"Planning a wedding is a great opportunity for a couple to work on their partnership and start developing a system for tackling challenges together," McCready says. "It also provides a chance to see the tradeoffs inherent in most situations. It gives you an opportunity to work on clarifying your own values and priorities while also gaining an understanding of the values and priorities of your spouse. Watching your spouse's family interact with one another also may help you to understand your spouse better." 